

Mongrels,
Bastards,
Orphans,
and
Vagabonds

*Mexican Immigration
and the Future of Race in America*

Gregory Rodriguez



Pantheon Books, New York

But just as World War II had expanded the frontiers of the Mexican American experience and identity, it also created the conditions for a new migration that would bring Mexico closer than it had been since before the Depression. While Mexican labor had been recruited in the 1920s, then pushed out in the 1930s, in the 1940s the U.S. government established a program to import contract laborers. The mobilization of American industry for the war effort and the contemporaneous loss of manpower to the armed services created a labor shortage, particularly in agriculture. Between 1939 and 1943, the U.S. had lost 2.8 million agricultural workers.¹²⁸ Growers turned to the federal government for help. In the summer of 1942, the Roosevelt administration negotiated an agreement with Mexico, whereby the latter would provide *braceros*—from the Spanish word *brazo*, or “arm”—to help ease the labor shortage for the duration of the war. Mexican officials were amenable to the program in part because they saw it as their nation’s contribution to the war effort. In May of that year, Mexico had declared war on the Axis powers. But since it had no “intentions of sending large contingents to the fighting fronts, it felt obliged to assist in every way possible the country that was bearing the brunt of the war.”¹²⁹ Mexico also benefited in other ways. Not only did migrants send money back home in the form of remittances, but they often picked up new farming techniques that could later benefit their home communities. Nonetheless, the Mexican government was concerned about the treatment of the workers. They pushed the U.S. government for “guarantees concerning hours, conditions, housing, health care, sanitation facilities, transportation, a minimum wage of thirty cents per hour, and [paid] repatriation.”¹³⁰ For the first five years of the program, the Mexican government refused to send *braceros* to Texas due to its reputation for widespread discrimination against Mexicans. On September 29, 1942, federal authorities delivered the first five hundred workers to farms outside Stockton, California.

As historian Neil Foley wrote, “For the next seventeen years the government functioned as a national labor contractor for southwestern growers at taxpayers’ expense.”¹³¹ From 1942 to 1945, 168,000 *braceros* were recruited to the United States.¹³² While the program was initially established as a temporary wartime measure, Congress

later extended it annually through the late 1940s. In 1949, the government issued around 100,000 bracero visas.¹³³ By 1951, that number had doubled. That year, Congress bowed to pressure from growers and enacted a law that made the Bracero Program permanent.¹³⁴ By 1953, braceros made up 87 percent of cotton pickers and 74 percent of the cowboys in Texas.¹³⁵ By the late 1950s, 150,000 to 200,000 braceros labored in California's Central Valley.¹³⁶ By the time the program was discontinued in 1964, roughly five million workers had been employed in twenty-six states.

Still, farmers were never satisfied with the number of laborers they were allotted, and "during the late 1940s agricultural growers increasingly took matters into their own hands by recruiting undocumented workers."¹³⁷ Indeed, the Bracero Program was in part responsible for spurring a rise in illegal immigration. First, it "significantly widened the road to the United States."¹³⁸ Many of the risks that had formerly been involved in undertaking the trip north had been removed, thus encouraging a broader cross section of Mexicans to consider going to the United States. News of available jobs reached Mexican villages, and because there were more applicants than visas, many opted to cross without papers. In the spring of 1955, residents of Aguacaliente de Garate, a *pueblo* in the state of Sinaloa, learned that agricultural workers could earn up to 50 cents an hour in Texas, far more than the prevailing wage of 65 cents a day at home. Some read about it in the newspaper, while others heard announcements on the radio. The town's mayor distributed a sheet to those interested in signing up.¹³⁹

Over time, braceros established relationships with employers and "realized that there would be work waiting for anyone who showed up, with no questions asked."¹⁴⁰ Many growers actually preferred undocumented workers to braceros, and that preference would grow along with their need for labor. Not only did illegal immigrants have few rights under the law, but they could be hired without any concern on the employer's part about contracts, health benefits, and the minimum wage. Meantime, throughout the 1940s, the Immigration and Naturalization Service practiced a policy of selective enforcement. In 1948, one year before Mexico lifted its bracero ban on Texas, an INS district director in El Paso told his staff, "We do not have the person-

nel and means to prevent all these farmers from using illegal labor; therefore, unless and until Texas farmers are given the privilege of legally importing farm laborers from Mexico, their farms should not be indiscriminately raided."¹⁴¹ The INS sometimes went so far as to normalize the legal status of undocumented workers simply in order to accommodate growers. In October 1948, agents allowed seven thousand migrants to cross the border in El Paso, where they were arrested and then paroled to employers.

The onset of the Korean War in 1950 resulted in a new labor shortage that stimulated an increased supply of undocumented workers. In 1950, an unprecedented high of 469,000 illegal immigrants were apprehended at the border.¹⁴² Meantime, an unknown number of braceros skipped their contracts and became undocumented. Some looked for better-paying agricultural work; others headed for the cities. The longer they stayed the more they gravitated toward non-agricultural labor. Those who remained in the U.S. tended to integrate themselves into established Mexican American barrios. According to a 1951 study, "the wetback [a usually derogatory term for an illegal immigrant] naturally establishes contacts with those most like himself. He does his shopping in the 'Mexican' section of town . . . he rents a shack on the back of one of the lots owned and inhabited by a Spanish-speaking family; he turns to Spanish-speaking truckers for employment; when he has money he patronizes cantinas and pool halls in the 'Mexican' area; he attends social affairs and *bailes* [dances] with the Spanish-speaking people; he may go out with or even marry the daughter of Spanish-speaking citizens."¹⁴³ Many learned that "they could become legalized if they established families in the United States and some waited the requisite seven years to apply for a suspension of deportation and adjustment of their status to permanent resident."¹⁴⁴ At the same time, the number of legal migrants from Mexico increased exponentially in the postwar years, particularly in the 1950s. It was not uncommon for immigrant families to have members with varying levels of legal status in the United States.

But even as the agriculture industry sought more laborers—both legal and illegal—a growing number of Americans demanded that immigration be halted. Many Mexican Americans were among those

concerned about burgeoning immigration from Mexico. When news of the Bracero Program was first reported in 1942, several Mexican American organizations were quick to express their concerns. LULAC firmly opposed both illegal immigration and the Bracero Program. So did the G.I. Forum. Both organizations had worked hard to promote the image of Mexican Americans as being akin to the nation's many European-origin ethnic groups. The growing presence of unassimilated newcomers complicated their task. Critics of illegal immigration associated undocumented immigrants with "misery, disease, crime, and many other evils."¹⁴⁵ Many Americans believed that because they were by definition illegal, these aliens were prone to engage in criminal behavior. Mexican American civil rights advocates were well aware that such characterizations often influenced the public's opinion of Mexican Americans at large. They feared that the rising number of migrants would lead to an increase in acts of discrimination against all people of Mexican heritage. In 1951, former LULAC director and prominent Mexican American historian George I. Sánchez declared, "No careful distinctions are made between illegal aliens and local citizens of Mexican descent. They are lumped together as 'Mexicans' and the characteristics that are observed among the wetbacks are by extension assigned to the local people."¹⁴⁶ Sánchez feared that new immigration would retard Mexican Americans' process of integration into American society. He told the *New York Times* that "from a cultural standpoint, the influx of a million or more wetbacks a year transforms the Spanish-speaking people of the Southwest from an ethnic group which might be assimilated with reasonable facility into what I call a culturally indigestible peninsula of Mexico. The 'wet' migration . . . has set the whole assimilation process back at least twenty years."¹⁴⁷

Mexican American civil rights and labor advocates were concerned as well that the new migrants were taking jobs from and lowering wages for Mexican American workers. Representative Henry B. González, the first Mexican American ever elected to the House of Representatives from Texas, complained that braceros were "used to bring the misery of a people in one country to further depress the misery of a people in another country."¹⁴⁸ In a letter to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, one Mexican American from Texas wondered

why the government enforced more protective labor regulations for braceros than it did for American citizens. "One glaring inequality which people cannot understand is why the United States will guarantee to an *alien* a specified wage and deny the same to its own citizens. Doesn't charity begin at home?"¹⁴⁹ In her 1959 study on the barrio of San Jose, California, anthropologist Margaret Clark noted that the "general feeling among resident Mexican Americans is that the importation of *braceros* . . . increases job competition and keeps farm wages pitifully low."¹⁵⁰ The National Agricultural Workers' Union (NAWU), which represented thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, complained that braceros not only exerted downward pressure on wages, but they undermined labor organizing and further eroded working conditions. At one point, pioneering Mexican American scholar and NAWU organizer Ernesto Galarza worried that tension between Mexican Americans and migrants—both legal and illegal—could create a "brew of . . . racial strife."¹⁵¹ Some Mexican Americans considered braceros the equivalent of scabs, and there were occasional fights over jobs or women. One bracero recalled that "the ones who treat us bad are the . . . Mexicans that are born [in the United States]. They felt resentment against us. They feel uncomfortable with us. . . . They try to take advantage of us. . . . They laugh [at] us."¹⁵²

At the same time there existed a certain ethnic affinity between Mexican Americans and Mexican migrants. The fact that many Anglos made no distinctions between the two groups fostered sympathetic concern among many Mexican Americans for their foreign-born co-ethnics, legal and illegal. One foreign-born Californian expressed the conflicting emotions that some native-born and naturalized Mexican Americans felt. "I still don't know if I'm for or against the braceros. I guess that's because I first came to this country as a bracero myself in 1944, and know something about their problems. But I also know that when the braceros come in, the wages stay very low; that's pretty bad for people who have to earn their whole year's income just during the harvest season."¹⁵³ A native-born Mexican American activist concurred:

Naturally, we feel sorry for the *braceros*. We do what we can to see that they are exploited as little as possible up here. After all, our own

parents were in pretty much the same position as the *braceros* a generation ago. . . . But look at what the program is doing to us. We're trying to climb our way up the social ladder. . . . It's a hard enough fight, at best. The *braceros* come along, and hang on to the tail of our shirts. We can't brush them off, because that wouldn't be human. But their weight is dragging us down.¹⁵⁴

Mainstream Mexican American organizations were careful not to lay the blame for undocumented immigration on the migrants themselves. The G.I. Forum criticized both the federal government and the growers for their complicity in illegal immigration. LULAC blamed "Mexico for being unable to correct its unemployment crisis" and "U.S. agribusiness for knowingly hiring" illegal immigrants.¹⁵⁵ It criticized the Immigration and Naturalization Service for "allowing an avalanche of illegal Mexican labor" to lower wages.¹⁵⁶ In testimony before a House committee in 1955, Ernesto Galarza accused the U.S. government of rescuing Mexico from its own mismanagement and doing so, at the expense of the American worker. While he sympathized with and understood that the "so-called wetback is a product of the political and social conditions of Mexico," he nonetheless came down on the side of native-born and naturalized workers.¹⁵⁷ LULAC also called for the deportation of illegals. In 1948, the organization sent telegrams to President Harry S. Truman calling illegal immigration "a direct danger to our own citizens."¹⁵⁸ For its part, the G.I. Forum supported the expansion of the Border Patrol.

In 1952, Cold War fears pushed the McCarran-Walter Act through Congress despite President Truman's veto. Most Mexican American activists supported its provisions. The omnibus bill both liberalized immigration—by finally removing racial barriers to American citizenship—and at the same time tightened controls over the screening and entrance of immigrants. The new law "decreed that any [unnaturalized] alien who had entered the United States since 1924 was subject to summary deportation from the United States—regardless of his or her character, length of stay in the United States, employment record, or familial relationship to bona fide American citizens."¹⁵⁹ Public exasperation over the issue of illegal immigration—coupled

with the fear of communist infiltration—also led the INS to begin stepping up its enforcement in the early 1950s, even raiding farms in search of illegal workers. In February 1950, the Border Patrol increased its monthly apprehensions by 30 percent in Texas.¹⁶⁰ Four years later, the INS launched the well-publicized Operation Wetback, a massive roundup of illegal immigrants in the Southwest.

Conducted by a retired general as if it were a military campaign, Operation Wetback mobilized approximately 750 law enforcement agents, three hundred vehicles, and seven airplanes. Over a period of two years, the operation netted more than one million illegal immigrants.¹⁶¹ While Texas and California were the regions most affected, the operation also extended to cities as far from the border as Spokane and St. Louis. During the raids, the INS, which apprehended an average of two thousand people a day in California, routinely violated the constitutional rights of both illegal and legal residents. Not only were many U.S.-born children deported along with their parents, but American-born adults were sometimes stopped and required to produce proof of citizenship. Longtime immigrants were deported alongside recent arrivals. Indiscriminate INS sweeps of Mexican American neighborhoods created plenty of confusion and fear. According to historian David Gutiérrez, "INS dragnets not only were affecting putative illegal aliens but were also devastating Mexican American families, disrupting businesses in Mexican neighborhoods, and fanning interethnic animosities throughout the border region."¹⁶²

At the same, however, the INS more than doubled the number of *braceros* that could be imported each year. From 1955 to 1960, the annual quota of guest workers fluctuated between 400,000 and 450,000.¹⁶³ The irony of the situation was not lost on many contemporary observers. In 1955, Ernesto Galarza duly noted that "while one agency of the United States government rounded up the illegal aliens and deported them to Mexico . . . [an] other government agency was busily engaged in recruiting workers in Mexico to return them to U.S. farms."¹⁶⁴ In fact, the emergence of immigration as a hot button political issue made many Mexican American activists and an emerging cadre of intellectuals reassess their views of the relationship between Mexican Americans and immigrants—both legal and illegal. Even the leading Mexican American civil rights organizations, whose

membership had long been restricted to American citizens and whose goals were to achieve the full rights of American citizenship, began to discern the links between the rights of citizens and those of immigrants. By the late 1940s, most Mexican American political activists believed that the ethnic Mexican population had stabilized and would eventually join the American mainstream. In the words of historian Mario T. García, "They genuflected—like most other Americans—to the concept of the 'melting pot.'" ¹⁶⁵ Yet, particularly after 1950, the issue of immigration could not be ignored. Simply declaring their opposition to further immigration no longer sufficed as a strategy. In 1954, Albert Armendáriz, the national president of LULAC, argued that Mexican Americans had to come to terms with ongoing immigration from Mexico. He contended that the Mexican American experience was distinct from that of other ethnic Americans. Not only did newcomers continually reinforce the culture of the old country, he said, but "the constant influx of immigrants (*braceros* and wetbacks too) . . . make[s] the process of integration a perpetual one."¹⁶⁶ After witnessing the effects of summary deportations on Mexican American neighborhoods, LULAC declared its opposition to the McCarran-Walter Act on the ground that it was "oppressive and unjust and creating great hardships to thousands of families in the deportation of aliens who entered the country illegally but have established residence."¹⁶⁷ In the 1950s, the percentage of immigrants to the United States who came from Mexico doubled.¹⁶⁸ By the end of the decade, many activists were realizing that Mexican Americans were "constantly compelled to assess and define their own sense of social and cultural identity vis-à-vis the recent arrivals."¹⁶⁹

But just as many Mexican American activists were exploring their connection to immigrants, the anti-Mexican sentiment that had been exacerbated by Operation Wetback prompted greater numbers of newly middle-class Mexican Americans to downplay their ethnicity. As more avenues for upward mobility opened, many Mexican Americans felt it necessary to disassociate themselves from anything Mexican in order to avoid the sting of lingering prejudice. By 1960, over half of ethnic Mexicans in the United States were at least third generation Americans, and thus highly acculturated.¹⁷⁰ In other words, they—particularly those with lighter skin—were more capable of

obscuring their "differentness" when among Anglos. Not that this strategy was entirely new. For decades, unknown numbers of upwardly mobile Mexican Americans passed themselves off as Spanish in order to receive better treatment from Anglos. Terms like "Latin" or "Latin American" were frequently substituted for "Mexican." The largest Mexican American organizations—League of United Latin American Citizens, the American G.I. Forum, and later the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations—studiously avoided using the term Mexican in their names. But in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the paradoxical combination of increased mobility and strong anti-Mexican sentiment encouraged greater numbers of Mexican Americans, particularly the most accomplished, to go one step further and completely deny their ethnic background.

By the 1960s, one-quarter of Mexican Americans in California were in business, held white-collar jobs, or were in the professions. The same portion could be found in low-skilled work—farm, factory, or domestic. The other half could be considered working to lower middle class.¹⁷¹ Nearly 80 percent of Mexican Americans in the Southwest lived in cities.¹⁷² While economic, geographic, and social distinctions made it difficult to speak of a single Mexican American culture, the working-class Mexican American subculture was best regarded "as a variant of the United States working class subculture, but influenced to a lesser or stronger degree by traditional Mexican folk culture."¹⁷³ According to one contemporary sociologist, they should be understood as "partially Mexicanized Americans rather than as partially Americanized Mexicans. No one who has carefully observed the way of life of rural and of urban lower-class people in Mexico . . . would make the mistake of considering them the reverse."¹⁷⁴ One 1970 survey of Mexican Americans in San Bernardino, California, revealed that 30.2 percent of children spoke "mostly English" to their first generation parents, 81.6 percent to second-generation parents, and 93.8 percent to third-generation parents.¹⁷⁵